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The Palimpsest

Volume 8 | Number 5

Article 15

5-1-1927

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Recommended Citation

Meredith, Mabel M. "Early Iowa Camp-Meetings." *The Palimpsest* 8 (1927), 164-168.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol8/iss5/15>

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Early Iowa Camp-Meetings

When Iowa was younger, the roads poorer, and transportation facilities more inadequate, the means of amusement were few and the opportunities for relaxation were very infrequent. As a reward for unusual industry in the corn and wheat fields, the younger members of pioneer families were often promised a trip to the yearly camp-meeting after harvest. Thither they were lured, not by remembered paroxysms of religious fervor, but rather by the gregarious instinct necessarily stifled by long working hours and a sparsely settled community.

The camp site was chosen near a swift running creek, and in a grove of heavy timber. A huge tent was raised. Illumination was provided in a unique manner. Four forked posts were driven into the ground, small poles placed between them, and these covered with slender green poles. On this foundation, six inches of earth was heaped and on top of this earth the illuminating fires were kept burning by a voluntary firing squad from the congregation.

In the front of the tent a large platform was built for the preachers. There were usually three or four of them. The congregation was seated on improvised benches — planks placed across strings of logs. Through the center an aisle led to the speakers' table and the converts' bench. On the

right the men assembled and the women on the left.

The singing was spontaneous and without instrumental aid. Nevertheless it was not without harmony and, if one were to judge by results, inspirational. Frequently no one in the congregation possessed a hymn book except the preacher, who gave out the verses to be sung, two at a time. As the fervor of the meeting grew, improvised songs would take the place of the old-time favorites. These "spiritual songs", perfect in time and crude in expression, were effective in stirring the sinner to repentance.

Most of these old hymns have been lost, but a few have been preserved. One, by Caleb J. Taylor, described a camp-meeting scene.

Sinners through the camp are falling,
Deep distress their souls pervade,
Wondering why they are not rolling
In the dark infernal shade.
Grace and mercy, long neglected,
Now they ardently implore;
In an hour when least expected
Jesus bids them weep no more.

Hear them then their God extolling,
Tell the wonders he has done;
While they rise, see others falling!
Light into their hearts hath shone.
Prayer and praise, and exhortation,
Blend in one perpetual sound;
Music sweet beyond expression,
To rejoicing saints around.

More often the theme dwelt upon the agony of the crucifixion. A stanza from a familiar hymn by John A. Grenade seldom failed to bring contrition to the hearts of the singers.

Think of what your Savior bore
In the gloomy garden,
Sweating blood at every pore,
To procure thy pardon;
See Him stretched upon the wood,
Bleeding, grieving, crying,
Suffering all the wrath of God,
Groaning, gasping, dying.

Wrought to a high pitch of emotionalism by the singing, the people at the meeting visualized the suffering of their Savior for sinners like themselves until they felt overwhelmed by God's mercy. Meanwhile the preachers proclaimed the rewards and punishments of the two H's, exhorting the lost souls to come forward and be saved. Many were converted, and early-day conversions were remarkably permanent.

The eloquence of the early evangelists was not polished oratory. Deep conviction and powerful lungs were often their principal qualifications. From much and varied experience they learned the art of expounding the gospel.

"My Alma Mater is Brush College, more ancient, though less pretentious, than Yale or Harvard or Princeton," declared John Strange in defense of his training. "Her academic groves are the boundless

forests and prairies of these western wilds; her Pierian springs are the gushing fountains from the rocks; her Arcadian groves and Orphic songs are the wild woods and the birds of every color and every song, relieved now and then with the bass hootings of the night owl and the weird treble of the whip-poorwill; her curriculum is the philosophy of nature and the mysteries of redemption; her library is the word of God, the discipline and the hymn book, supplemented with trees and brooks and stones, all of which are full of wisdom and sermons and speeches; and her parchments of literary honors are the horse and the saddle-bags."

In the grove where the camp-meeting was held, teams were unhitched and tied to the wagons. Many people who had come from a distance pitched a tent and stayed the week. With them they brought cooking utensils, fodder for their horses, and an abundance of food. Their larders contained crates of chickens ready for the frying pan, hams, bacon, flour, sugar, coffee, new comb honey, green corn, potatoes, string beans, and watermelons. This period of relaxation from every-day drudgery was a season of feasting. Certainly there was no gastronomic asceticism at the camp-meeting. Occasionally one of the men folks had to be dispatched for fresh supplies of food.

Privileges were granted to concessionaires who dispensed lemonade, gingerbread, dried herring, raisins, candy, and watermelons. They also dealt in

jack-knives, wooden pocket combs, plug tobacco, and fishing tackle. A ubiquitous covered wagon plied an impious though flourishing trade. Jugs of whisky found their way to the thirsty and, though these were in the minority, there seemed to be sufficient trade to keep the wagon hovering on the outskirts of the grove throughout the week.

Some of the boys brought in strings of fish. Others hunted wild blackberries, and with these their mothers baked evanescent "double decked" pies.

At these meetings the political course of the nation — local, state, and national — was fashioned again and again. Arguments were bitter and prolonged. Often they lasted from one yearly camp-meeting to the next. Convictions were solid, and political conversions were far rarer than their religious counterpart. Men who had spent a winter strengthening their beliefs did not yield easily.

Unlike the hasty revival meeting of the present day — a mere episode in the lives of busy people — the early camp-meeting was a very important event to the Iowa pioneer. Simple, industrious, with few books to becloud inquisitive minds, they absorbed the best of the preachments of these camp-meeting evangelists. The preachers themselves, being sincere and hard-working, contributed not a little to the faith and sturdy honesty that was the foundation of our State.

MABEL M. MEREDITH